

Hijacking Freire

The Emergence of PRA and Genealogy of Reversal



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December 2024/November 2025/March 2026/July 2026

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) did not descend from development orthodoxy; it emerged as a critique of it. Its immediate ancestor, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), surfaced in the late 1970s at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, out of three simultaneous exhaustions: the "rural development tourism" of brief, biased field visits by urban-based professionals; the "survey slavery" of costly, slow, misleading questionnaires; and the dawning recognition that rural people already possessed rigorous, systematic knowledge of their own conditions that outside experts had simply refused to see. Robert Chambers, the figure most associated with codifying the approach, framed this as a "reversal of learning" — a deliberate inversion of who teaches whom.

The lineage is genuinely plural and insurgent in its roots: agroecosystem analysis from Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen in Thailand, applied anthropology, farming systems research, and — crucially — activist participatory research going back to 1968, a strand that Chambers himself traced to Paulo Freire and the conviction "that poor and exploited people can and should be enabled to analyse their own reality". The term PRA itself first appeared around 1988–89 in near-simultaneous experiments in Kenya (with Clark University and the National Environment Secretariat) and in India and Nepal (through the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Gujarat), with India and Nepal becoming, by the early 1990s, the most intensive sites of innovation. What distinguished PRA from RRA was not technique but posture: in RRA, "we" — the outsiders — remain dominant, extracting and analysing; in PRA, the intention was that "they" become dominant, that local people themselves conduct the analysis, set the agenda, and own the results. This is the seed of what should have become an empowerment methodology rather than a data-

collection instrument — and understanding that founding intention is the necessary first step before diagnosing how it was appropriated.

The Appropriation: How PRA Was Captured by the Dominant System

The journey from insurgent method to institutionalised orthodoxy is well documented, and it constitutes the central counter-theoretical problem this document must confront. By the mid-1990s, critics inside the participatory development establishment itself — published in PLA Notes 22 (1995) — were already naming the symptoms: an unexamined assumption that using PRA tools automatically produces positive change, agendas driven from outside communities rather than from within, one-off trainings with no institutional follow-through, an unchallenged fiction of "community harmony" that erases internal hierarchy, and, most damningly, the "co-option of the acronym, making it a label without substance". PRA had become a technique to be deployed rather than a political stance to be inhabited.

Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari's landmark collection *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001) systematised this critique into three interlocking "tyrannies." The tyranny of decision-making and control describes facilitators who, behind a rhetoric of neutrality, quietly override legitimate local decision processes and determine what can be known and how. The tyranny of the group shows how the demand for consensus suppresses internal difference — gender, caste, class — consolidating dominant local voices as the "authentic" community view while silencing subaltern dissent within the very population PRA claims to empower. The tyranny of method describes how participation became such an unchallengeable orthodoxy — a "quasi-religious" good — that alternative and more radical political strategies were foreclosed, and the diagrams, matrices, and "relaxed" facilitation techniques themselves were shown to be already saturated with the values and priorities of Western-trained experts, never neutral tools.

Andrea Cornwall and Irene Guijt, writing from within the PRA community, added a further register: the "bureaucratisation of participation," in which the logic of empowerment collides with an NGO's organisational survival needs, producing what Sangeeta Kamat termed the depoliticisation of grassroots work — a shift "from grassroots workers to a skilled, trained 'staff'" who regard their work as apolitical and disconnected from the structural violence of debt policy and structural adjustment that produced the poverty they are appraising. Wendy Wolford's geographic reading pushes this further: PRA's "provided spaces" — the workshop, the training session — function as a kind of depoliticised container, a state of exception that displaces development from the political institutions of the postcolonial state and nurtures what she calls, following Foucault via Tania Li, a permanent "will to improve" that manufactures compliant subjects rather than emancipated ones.

The material embodiment of this appropriation is a recognisable figure: the mid-level, urban-educated, middle-class social worker or NGO field officer, trained in a three-week PRA certificate course, who arrives with a prepared toolkit — social maps, transect walks, wealth-ranking matrices, seasonality diagrams — deploys them in a single "participatory" workshop, extracts consensus, writes it into a proposal document for a donor, and departs. Sonia Alvarez and Sabine Lang's "NGO-isation" thesis, and Kamat's Indian-specific analysis, describe precisely this transformation of a once-radical repertoire into professionalised, projectised expertise: "the professionalization of community-based NGOs and their subsequent depoliticization represent two sides of the same coin," producing hierarchies between salaried professionals and the grassroots,

and thereby "small hegemonic elites" that reproduce, rather than dismantle, the class distance PRA was invented to erase. This is the crux of the appropriation: a method born to reverse the flow of knowledge and power was absorbed back into the very apparatus — donor-driven, bureaucratic, extractive-in-new-clothing — that it had set out to overturn.

Deschooling and Decolonisation as Counter-Movements

Two intellectual currents supply the theoretical resources to reverse this appropriation, and both belong to the community of thought this document is written within. Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971) is not primarily about classrooms; it is an indictment of any "manipulative institution" that monopolises the legitimate production of knowledge and certifies some people as knowers and others as recipients. Applied to PRA, deschooling names the moment when a social mapping exercise is run by a certified "facilitator" using standardised symbols and steps taught in an institute-issued manual — the community becomes, once again, a passive site of instruction rather than the author of its own analysis. Illich's alternative — "convivial," self-activating exchanges organised around things, models, peers, and elders rather than credentialed experts — is a direct methodological prescription for what decolonised PRA must become: tools that pass entirely into community hands, taught peer-to-peer, with no certifying outsider required for legitimacy.

The decolonial current runs through Aníbal Quijano's coloniality of power, Walter Mignolo, and Arturo Escobar's post-development and pluriverse thinking, and it supplies the second correction. Escobar's central argument is that "development" itself — including its participatory variants — remains a discourse of Western modernity that positions the Global South as perpetually catching up, needing appraisal, needing a plan. The pluriverse alternative insists on "a world where many worlds fit," refusing to universalise a single template of what counts as valid knowledge, valid land use, or valid community organisation.

Orlando Fals Borda, writing from Colombia from the 1970s onward, had already built a decolonised methodology answering this exact problem: Participatory Action Research (PAR), grounded not in adapted Western technique but in what he called "a decolonized sociology — not copied from foreign examples but recreated," combining collective research, the "critical recovery of history" through subaltern memory, and an explicit rejection of the researcher/researched distinction. Fals Borda's ethical instruction — "do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose your technique arrogantly... be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them" — is arguably the single most direct counter-hegemonic instruction available for redesigning PRA's social mapping component. Freire's *conscientização* and Fals Borda's PAR converge, as scholars of Latin American decolonial pedagogy note, precisely on this point: research and appraisal are themselves sites of intellectual colonialism unless deliberately reconstructed from within popular struggle.

Read together, deschooling and decoloniality push PRA in the same direction from two angles: deschooling attacks the institutional certification and expert monopoly embedded in PRA's professionalised delivery; decoloniality attacks the underlying epistemic hierarchy that treats "development" categories — poverty line, land-use classification, wealth rank — as universal rather than as impositions of a colonial-modern worldview. The movement this document is tracing is therefore not simply "PRA done more sensitively" but a mind-heart-set shift: from community development (communities as objects to be appraised, planned for, and improved

according to an external standard of progress) to community empowerment (communities as sovereign subjects generating their own categories, their own maps, their own historical narrative, and their own criteria for what counts as flourishing).

Ground-Level Examples from the Global South

Concrete practice bears out both the appropriation and the possibility of reversal, and India offers some of the richest evidence precisely because it was one of the two founding sites of PRA itself. The Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, Pakistan, founded in 1980 by Akhtar Hameed Khan, offers a model close to the decolonised ideal this document is aiming for. Rather than an NGO team producing sanitation maps for a donor report, OPP-RTI trained Orangi residents themselves — including a dedicated Youth Training Programme launched in 1994 — in surveying and mapping their own sewer lines, lane by lane, producing "circle handbooks" that residents used directly to negotiate with the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board and the Sindh Katchi Abadi Authority. Crucially, local mappers, not outside professionals, led the fieldwork and trained the next cohort of peer mappers — a genuinely Illichian, convivial transfer of technical capacity that produced political leverage rather than a report shelved in an office.

India's own trajectory under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) offers the clearest example of subaltern or counter-mapping as a legally enforceable empowerment tool rather than a consultative gesture. Under Section 3(1)(i), it is the Gram Sabha — the full village assembly, not a trained NGO facilitator — that is the primary legal authority to determine, verify, and map Community Forest Resource claims; the Forest Rights Committee it elects prepares "a rough sketch map... with local names," documented in the Gram Sabha's own idiom, showing dependency and customary use rather than the state's own forest-department boundaries.

This inverts the classic PRA power relation: the map is not extracted by a facilitator for a project document but produced by the community as the primary evidentiary basis for a legal claim against the state, and the very act of mapping "need not correspond to existing legal boundaries," explicitly privileging customary, lived, oral geography over cadastral colonial-era classification. That this remains contested is instructive: a 2026 central government directive attempting to force Community Forest Resource maps into alignment with Forest Department "Working Plans" has been read by rights groups as a direct attempt to re-subordinate Gram Sabha authority back to bureaucratic, expert-controlled mapping — a live demonstration of the appropriation dynamic still unfolding in real time.

A related South Indian case among the Adilabad Gonds shows what a genuinely decolonised social/resource map can look like epistemically, not merely procedurally. Working with — but not subordinated to — an NGO, Gond elders produced a map that incorporated forest deities, ancestral spirits, and "other-than-human actors as equal agents of conservation," a "non-sovereign, symmetrical" cartography that explicitly refuses the modern, secular, human-centred grid of conventional PRA resource mapping. This is decolonisation operating at the level of ontology, not just process: the map itself becomes a counter-hegemonic artefact because its categories — sacred groves for a forest deity, land for a village mother goddess — are the community's own cosmology rather than imported land-use taxonomies.

Counter-mapping more broadly, as theorised by Nancy Peluso and surveyed across the Global South, is defined precisely as the appropriation of the state's own cartographic techniques by communities to assert customary claims the state refuses to recognise — used, for instance, by the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations in Canada and by indigenous communities in Mindanao under the PAFID-IFAD project, which supported roughly 12,000 indigenous people across nine communities to map and legally claim some 100,000 hectares of ancestral domain. The throughline across these cases — Orangi, Indian FRA villages, Gond sacred-ecology mapping, Philippine ancestral domain claims — is that decolonised mapping functions as legal and political leverage generated and held by the community itself, not as a data product handed up to an intermediary organisation.

Constructing the Decolonised Methodology: From Facilitator to Community-Held Practice

The counter-theoretical position that follows from this evidence has several concrete methodological implications for redesigning PRA's tools, including social mapping, transect walks, and beyond.

First, subaltern mapping must replace facilitator-led social mapping as the default entry technique. Rather than a trained outsider drawing symbols on the ground with community members filling in prompted categories (household wealth tier, water source, school), the starting question becomes: what does this community already know how to represent, in what medium, using what categories of significance — sacred, customary, kin-based, seasonal — and how can that self-generated representation itself become the map, with no external template imposed in advance? The Gond case and the FRA "rough sketch map... with local names" are working templates for this reversal.

Second, the transect walk — classically an outsider-led linear traverse noting soil, crop, and land-use zones — must be reoriented as a walk led entirely by community elders and youth narrating their own history of the land: displacement, encroachment, sacred sites, sites of resistance and struggle. This draws directly on Fals Borda's "critical recovery of history," the systematic recovery through collective memory of "those elements of the past which proved useful in the defence of the interests of exploited classes". The walk becomes a historicising, politicising act rather than a resource inventory.

Third, and most structurally important, the role of the middle-class social worker or NGO professional must shift from method-owner to method-transferrer, with an explicit, time-bound exit — modelled on Orangi's Youth Training Programme, where the objective from the outset was that community members themselves would train the next generation of community mappers. Any PRA process without a built-in mechanism for full transfer of the technique — not just the output — to community members reproduces the professionalised dependency Kamat identifies as the core mechanism of depoliticisation.

Fourth, evaluation criteria for a "successful" decolonised PRA process must be rewritten. Conventional PRA measures success by the completeness and accuracy of the map or diagram produced within the workshop. A decolonised version must instead ask whether the process has produced durable community-held capacity (can the community repeat the exercise unaided next year?), whether it has produced usable political leverage (as with FRA claims or Orangi's negotiations with the water board), and whether it has surfaced and legitimised categories of

knowledge — cosmological, historical, oral — that the dominant development apparatus routinely erases.

Finally, this whole reconstruction should be read as consistent with, and indeed a concrete instance of, the broader pluriverse project: refusing the idea that there is one correct, universalisable participatory method to be exported village to village, and instead treating each community's own epistemic and cosmological resources as the substantive content of the appraisal, with PRA's inherited tools reduced to loose scaffolding rather than a fixed protocol. The movement traced across this document — from RRA's extractive origins, through PRA's brief empowerment promise, through its NGO-ised capture, to its contested re-radicalisation in Global South land-rights and cosmological mapping practice — is precisely the long arc from community development orientation to community empowerment mind-heart-set that this inquiry set out to document.

Work Referred To (Explore)

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- [Overview of participatory methods](#)
- [Participatory Rural Appraisal](#) - Participatory rural appraisal is a citizen-centred method of development
- [THE WORLD BANK GROUP ARCHIVES](#)
- [\[PDF\] A critical assessment of Robert Chambers' work.](#)
- [RHeaver2.PDF](#)
- [Participatory Approaches to Rural Development.](#)
- [The Geography of Participation](#) - Revisiting the critique of participatory development and one of its core political technologies.
- [Participation: The new tyranny?](#) by [Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari \(eds\)](#) - The book is a collection of 11 conference papers. The central theme is that participatory development
- [Tyranny/Transformation: Power and Paradox in Participatory](#)
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